CLASSIFIED BY: NSICG
REASON: 1.4 (C)
DECLASSIFY ON: 12-31-2045
DATE: 11-19-2024

ALL INFORMATION CONTAINED
HEREIN IS UNCLASSIFIED EXCEPT
WHERE SHOWN OTHERWISE

~~SECRET//NOFORN~~

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

Import Form

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Form Type: EMAIL - Email **Date:** 09/17/2020

Title: (U) contact with Facebook shows

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Approved By: A/SIA

Drafted By:

Case ID #:

(U)

(U)

(U)

Synopsis: (U) Cyber SSA relayed information from Facebook indicating the company reported by the Washington Post.

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~~**Reason: 1.4(b)**~~
~~**Derived From: FBI NSIC CG**~~
~~**Declassify On: 50X1-HUM**~~

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~~SECRET//NOFORN~~

ALL INFORMATION CONTAINED
HEREIN IS UNCLASSIFIED
DATE 11-19-2024 BY [redacted] NSICG

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From: [redacted] (FBI)
Sent: Thursday, September 17, 2020 9:55 AM
To: [redacted] (FBI)
Cc: [redacted] (FBI); [redacted] (FBI); [redacted] (FBI); [redacted] (FBI); [redacted] (FBI); [redacted] (FBI); [redacted] (FBI); [redacted] (FBI); [redacted] (FBI)
Subject: RE: Washington Post [redacted] -- UNCLASSIFIED/~~FOUO~~

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SentinelCaseId: [redacted]

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Classification: UNCLASSIFIED/~~FOUO~~

Alcon,

Just heard back from Facebook regarding this. They said [redacted]

Best Regards,

[redacted]

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Supervisory Special Agent, Squad [redacted]
National Security Cyber Investigations
[redacted] Division
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Work:
Cell: [redacted]

From: [redacted] (FBI) [redacted]
Sent: Wednesday, September 16, 2020 1:20 PM
To: [redacted] (FBI) [redacted]
Cc: [redacted] (FBI) [redacted] (FBI) [redacted] (FBI) [redacted] (FBI) [redacted] (FBI) [redacted] (FBI) [redacted] (FBI) [redacted] (FBI) [redacted] (FBI) [redacted]
Subject: Washington Post [redacted] --- UNCLASSIFIED/~~FOUO~~

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Classification: UNCLASSIFIED/~~FOUO~~

TRANSITORY RECORD

[redacted]

I imagine your folks have already heard about this WaPost article from yesterday about [redacted]

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I ask because [redacted]
[redacted] and because of [redacted]

Thanks,
IA [redacted]

Pro-Trump youth group enlists teens in secretive campaign likened to a 'troll farm,' prompting rebuke by Facebook and Twitter
By Isaac Stanley-Becker
September 15, 2020 at 3:05 p.m. MST

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/turning-point-teens-disinformation-trump/2020/09/15/c84091ae-f20a-11ea-b796-2dd09962649c_story.html

One tweet claimed coronavirus numbers were intentionally inflated, adding, "It's hard to know what to believe." Another warned, "Don't trust Dr. Fauci." A Facebook comment argued that mail-in ballots "will lead to fraud for this election," while an Instagram comment amplified the erroneous claim that 28 million ballots went missing in the past four elections.

The messages have been emanating in recent months from the accounts of young people in Arizona seemingly expressing their own views — standing up for President Trump in a battleground state and echoing talking points from his reelection campaign.

Far from representing a genuine social media groundswell, however, the posts are the product of a sprawling yet secretive campaign that experts say evades the guardrails put in place by social media companies to limit online disinformation of the sort used by Russia during the 2016 campaign.

Teenagers, some of them minors, are being paid to pump out the messages at the direction of Turning Point Action, an affiliate of Turning Point USA, the prominent conservative youth organization based in Phoenix, according to four people with independent knowledge of the effort. Their descriptions were confirmed by detailed notes from relatives of one of the teenagers who recorded conversations with him about the efforts.

The campaign draws on the spam-like behavior of bots and trolls, with the same or similar language posted repeatedly across social media. But it is carried out, at least in part, by humans paid to use their own accounts, though nowhere disclosing their relationship with Turning Point Action or the digital firm brought in to oversee the day-to-day activity. One user included a link to Turning Point USA's website in his Twitter profile until The Washington Post began asking questions about the activity.

In response to questions from The Post, Twitter on Tuesday suspended at least 20 accounts involved in the activity for "platform manipulation and spam." Facebook also removed a number of accounts as part of what the company said is an ongoing investigation.

The effort generated thousands of posts this summer on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, according to an examination by The Post and an assessment by an independent specialist in data science. Nearly 4,500 tweets containing identical content that were identified in the analysis probably represent a fraction of the overall output.

The months-long effort by the tax-exempt nonprofit is among the most ambitious domestic influence campaigns uncovered this election cycle, said experts tracking the evolution of deceptive online tactics. "In 2016, there were Macedonian teenagers interfering in the election by running a troll farm and writing salacious articles for money," said Graham Brookie, director of the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab. "In this election, the troll farm is in Phoenix."

The effort, Brookie added, illustrates "that the scale and scope of domestic disinformation is far greater than anything a foreign adversary could do to us."

Turning Point Action, whose 26-year-old leader, Charlie Kirk, delivered the opening speech at this year's Republican National Convention, issued a statement from the group's field director defending the social media campaign and saying any comparison to a troll farm was a "gross mischaracterization."

"This is sincere political activism conducted by real people who passionately hold the beliefs they describe online, not an anonymous troll farm in Russia," the field director, Austin Smith, said in the statement. He said the operation reflected an attempt by Turning Point Action to maintain its advocacy despite the challenges presented by the coronavirus pandemic, which has curtailed many traditional political events. "Like everyone else, Turning Point Action's plans for nationwide in-person events and activities were completely disrupted by the pandemic," Smith said. "Many positions TPA had planned for in field work were going to be completely cut, but TPA managed to reimagine these roles and working with our marketing partners, transitioned some to a virtual and online activist model." The group declined to make Kirk available for an interview.

The online salvo targeted prominent Democratic politicians and news organizations on social media. It mainly took the form of replies to their posts, part of a bid to reorient political conversation. The messages — some of them false and some simply partisan — were parceled out in precise increments as directed by the effort's leaders, according to the people with knowledge of the highly coordinated activity, most of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity to protect the privacy of minors carrying out the work. One parent of two teenagers involved in the effort, Robert Jason Noonan, said his 16- and 17-year-old daughters were being paid by Turning Point to push "conservative points of view and values" on social media. He said they have been working with the group since about June, adding in an interview, "The job is theirs until they want to quit or until the election."

Four years ago, the Kremlin-backed Internet Research Agency amplified Turning Point's right-wing memes as part of Moscow's sweeping interference aimed at boosting Trump, according to expert assessments prepared for the Senate Intelligence Committee. One report pointed specifically to the use of Turning Point content as evidence of Russia's "deep knowledge of American culture, media, and influencers."

Now, some technology industry experts contend that the effort this year by Turning Point shows how domestic groups are not just producing eye-catching online material but also increasingly using social media to spread it in disruptive or misleading ways.

“It sounds like the Russians, but instead coming from Americans,” said Jacob Ratkiewicz, a software engineer at Google whose academic research, as a PhD student at Indiana University at Bloomington, addressed the political abuse of social media.

To some participants, the undertaking feels very different. Notes from the recorded conversation with a 16-year-old participant — the authenticity of which was confirmed by The Post — indicate, “He said it’s really fun and he works with his friends.” The participant, through family members, declined to comment.

The social media users active in the campaign, some of whom were using their real names, identified themselves only as Trump supporters and young Republicans. One described herself simply as a high school sophomore interested in softball and cheerleading.

Noonan, 46, said “some of the comments may go too far” but cast the activity as a response to similar exaggerations by Democrats. “Liberals say things that are way out there, and conservatives say things that are sometimes way out there, or don’t have enough evidence.”

Those recruited to participate in the campaign were lifting the language from a shared online document, according to Noonan and other people familiar with the setup. They posted the same lines a limited number of times to avoid automated detection by the technology companies, these people said. They also were instructed to edit the beginning and ending of each snippet to differentiate the posts slightly, according to the notes from the recorded conversation with a participant.

Noonan said his daughters sometimes work from an office in the Phoenix area and are classified as independent contractors, not earning “horrible money” but also not making minimum wage. Relatives of another person involved said the minor is paid an hourly rate and can score bonuses if his posts spur higher engagement.

Smith, as part of written responses to The Post, deferred specific questions about the financial setup to a “marketing partner” called Rally Forge, which he said was running the program for Turning Point. Jake Hoffman, president and chief executive of the Phoenix-based digital marketing firm, confirmed the online workers were classified as contractors but declined to comment further on “private employment matters.” He did not respond to a question about the office setup.

Addressing the use of centralized documents to prepare the messages, Hoffman said in written responses, “Every working team within my agency works out of dozens of collaborative documents every day, as is common with all dynamic marketing agencies or campaign phone banks for example.”

The messages have appeared mainly as replies to news articles about politics and public health posted on social media. They seek to cast doubt on the integrity of the electoral process, asserting that Democrats are using mail balloting to steal the election — “thwarting the will of the American people,” they alleged.

The posts also play down the threat from covid-19, which claimed the life of Turning Point's co-founder Bill Montgomery in July. One post, which was spread across social media dozens of times, suggested baselessly that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is inflating the death toll from the disease. (Most experts say deaths are probably undercounted.) Another pushed for schools to reopen, reasoning, "President Trump is not worried because younger people do very well while dealing with covid."

Much of the blitz was aimed squarely at Joe Biden, the Democratic presidential nominee. The former vice president, asserted one message, "is being controlled by behind the scenes individuals who want to take America down the dangerous path towards socialism."

By seeking to rebut mainstream news articles, the operation illustrates the extent to which some online political activism is designed to discredit the media.

While Facebook and Twitter have pledged to crack down on what they have labeled coordinated inauthentic behavior, in Facebook's case, and platform manipulation and spam, as Twitter defines its rules, their efforts falter in the face of organizations willing to pay users to post on their own accounts, maintaining the appearance of independence and authenticity.

In removing accounts Tuesday, Twitter pointed to policies specifying, "You can't artificially amplify or disrupt conversations through the use of multiple accounts." That includes "coordinating with or compensating others to engage in artificial engagement or amplification, even if the people involved use only one account," according to Twitter.

On Twitter, the nearly verbatim language emanated from about two dozen accounts through the summer. The exact number of people posting the messages was not clear. Smith, the Turning Point field director, said, "The number fluctuates and many have gone back to school." Hoffman, in an email, said, "Dozens of young people have been excited to share their beliefs on social media."

The Rally Forge leader is a city council member in Queen Creek, Ariz., and a candidate for the state legislature. Some of the users at points listed their location as Gilbert, Ariz., a suburb of Phoenix, according to screen shots reviewed by The Post. Some followed each other on Twitter, while most were following only a list of prominent politicians and media outlets.

One was followed by a former member of Congress, Republican Tim Huelskamp of Kansas, who is on the Catholics for Trump advisory board. Huelskamp said he could not recall what led him to follow the account and was not familiar with the effort by Turning Point. But he praised the group for "doing a great job of messaging, particularly with younger folks."

Several teenagers were using their real names or variations of their names, while other accounts active in posting the pro-Trump messaging appeared to be operating under pseudonyms. The Post's review found that some participants seem to maintain multiple accounts on Facebook, which is a violation of the company's policies.

Explaining why the users do not disclose that they are being paid as political activists, Hoffman said they are "using their own personal profiles and sharing their content that reflects their values and beliefs." He pointed to the risk of online bullying, as well as physical harm, in explaining why "we've left how much personal and professional information they wish to share up to them."

The accounts on Twitter alone posted 4,401 tweets with identical content, not including slight variations of the language, according to Pik-Mai Hui, a PhD student in informatics at Indiana University at Bloomington who performed an analysis of the content at the request of The Post. The analysis found characteristics strongly suggestive of bots — such as double commas and dangling commas that often appear with automatic scripts — though at least some of the accounts were being operated by humans.

While the messaging appears designed to seed pro-Trump content across social media, said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a professor of communication at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, the act of repeated posting also helps instill the ideas among those performing the activity. In addition, it familiarizes the users with the ways of online combat, she said, and makes their accounts valuable assets should different needs arise as the election nears.

"There is a logic to having an army locally situated in a battleground state, having them up and online and ready to be deployed," Jamieson said.

Turning Point Action debuted as a 501(c)(4) organization last year, with more leeway in undertaking political advocacy than is afforded to the original group, which is barred from campaign activity as a 501(c)(3). Both nonprofits are required only to disclose the salaries of directors, officers and key employees, said Marc Owens, a tax attorney with Loeb & Loeb.

Turning Point dates to 2012, when Montgomery, retired from a career in marketing, heard Kirk, then 18, deliver a speech in the Chicago suburbs at Benedictine University's "Youth Government Day." He called the address "practically Reaganesque," according to a 2015 profile in Crain's Chicago Business newspaper, and urged Kirk, a former Eagle Scout, to put off college in favor of full-time political activism. Kirk became the face of Turning Point, while Montgomery was "the old guy who keeps it all legal," he told the business weekly.

The organization amassed prominent and wealthy conservative allies, including Richard Grenell, the former ambassador to Germany and acting director of national intelligence, and Foster Friess, who made a fortune in mutual funds and helps bankroll conservative and Christian causes. Both men sit on Turning Point's honorary board.

Its standing rose significantly as Trump came to power. Turning Point USA brought in nearly $80,000 in contributions and other funds in the fiscal year ending June 2013, according to IRS filings, a fraction of the $8 million it reported for 2017 and $11 million for 2018. The group, which describes itself as the largest and fastest-growing youth organization in America," claims to have a presence on more than 2,000 college and high school campuses. It hosts activist conferences and runs an alumni program. It also maintains a "Professor Watchlist" designed to expose instructors who "discriminate against conservative students, promote anti-American values and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom."

Kirk, the group's president and co-founder, has been embraced and promoted by Trump and his family. Speaking at Turning Point USA's Teen Student Action Summit last year, Trump hailed Kirk for building a "movement unlike anything in the history of our nation." A quote attributed to Donald Trump Jr., who has appeared at numerous Turning Point events, features prominently on the group's website: "I'm convinced that the work by Turning Point USA and Charlie Kirk will win back the future of America."

Kirk has returned the praise. In his speech at last month's Republican nominating convention, he extolled Trump as the "bodyguard of Western civilization."

Equally impassioned rhetoric marked the campaign on social media, with posts asserting that Black Lives Matter protesters were "fascist groups . . . terrorizing American citizens" and decrying the "BLM Marxist agenda," among other incendiary language.

Noonan said his wife, a hairstylist, monitors the online activity of their daughters more closely than he does, and that their work is often a topic of conversation when the family convenes in the evening. "We are Trump supporters, but one of the things my wife and I have been very consistent on is to always understand both sides and make decisions from there," the father said.

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Classification: UNCLASSIFIED//~~FOUO~~

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Classification: UNCLASSIFIED//~~FOUO~~

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FD-999 (Rev. 5-8-10)

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FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

Liaison with an Organization Outside of the FBI

Title: (U//~~FOUO~~) Liaison with UC Berkeley Police Dept. **Date:** 04/12/2018

CC: [redacted] b6 b7C b7E

Approved By: SSA [redacted]

Drafted By: [redacted]

Case ID #: [redacted] b3 b7E

Assessment Initiated: [redacted] set to expire [redacted] extension granted [redacted] set to expire [redacted] extension granted [redacted] set to expire [redacted] extension granted [redacted] set to b7E

UNCLASSIFIED//~~FOUO~~

Title: (U//~~FOUO~~) Liaison with UC Berkeley Police Dept.
Re: [redacted] 04/12/2018

expire [redacted] extension granted [redacted] set to expire [redacted] extension granted [redacted] set to expire [redacted] extension granted [redacted] set to expire [redacted] extension granted [redacted] set to expire [redacted]

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Responsible Organization: SAN FRANCISCO

Liaison Details: (U//~~FOUO~~) Liaison with [redacted] University of California, Berkeley Police Department (UCBPD), Cpt. [redacted] (UCBPD), Sgt. [redacted] Oakland Police Department, and [redacted] Northern California Regional Intelligence Center (NCRIC) to discuss upcoming events in the SF AOR to include:

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-Berkeley College Republicans (BCR) sponsored event- [redacted] (4/12/2018), Charlie Kirk and [redacted] (4/17/2018)- Kirk is the founder of Turning Point USA, a right-wing nonprofit organization whose stated mission is to educate students about "true free market values".

-Direct Action Everywhere (DxE) upcoming events- Hen Outreach at Memorial Glade (4/12/2018), Humane Cat Meat at Berkeley Farmer's Market (4/14/2018), World Day for Animals in Labs in Berkeley (4/24/2018), Day of Action (4/28/2018) and Animal Liberation Conference (5/23/2018 - 5/29/2018)

Cpt. [redacted] mentioned UC Berkeley students were allegedly receiving emails from DxE members requesting names of UC Berkeley lab students, researchers, and workers. Cpt. [redacted] stated he would forward the email to SA [redacted] once he received it.

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Additional topics included:
- Former Brazil President Dilma Rouseff (4/16/2018)
- Job Fair in Berkeley with possible ICE desk (4/19/2018)
- UC Berkeley Commencement with speaker Kamala Harris (5/12/2018)

Liaison Event: Meeting

Event Role: Conducted

[redacted]

b7E

Title: (U//~~FOUO~~) Liaison with UC Berkeley Police Dept.
Re: [redacted] 04/12/2018

Audience Type: Public Safety Officials

Initiative Type: Other

Total Attendees: 9

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[redacted]

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FD-1057 (Rev. 5-8-10)

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FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

Electronic Communication

Title: (U//~~FOUO~~) Video alleging DNC committed voter registration fraud

Date: 02/11/2020

CC: [redacted]

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From: PHOENIX [redacted]

Contact: [redacted]

Approved By: A/SIA [redacted]

Drafted By: [redacted]

Case ID #: [redacted]

Synopsis: (U//~~FOUO~~) On 22 January 2020, [redacted] uploaded a video to social media that alleged the Democratic National Committee committed voter registration fraud by teaching illegal immigrants how to register to vote in federal elections. [redacted]

b7E

Enclosure(s): Enclosed are the following items:

1. (U) [redacted] video alleging voter registration fraud

Details:

In response to allegations of voter registration fraud, writer downloaded the attached video from a social media website.

[redacted] filmed and uploaded the video titled [redacted]

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Title: (U//~~FOUO~~) Video alleging DNC committed voter registration fraud
Re: [redacted] 02/11/2020

[redacted]

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FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
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FOI/PA# 1585305-000

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Page 6 ~ b6; b7C; b7E;
Page 7 ~ b6; b7C; b7E;
Page 8 ~ b6; b7C; b7E;
Page 9 ~ b6; b7C; b7E;
Page 10 ~ b6; b7C; b7E;
Page 11 ~ b6; b7C; b7E;
Page 12 ~ b6; b7C; b7E;
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FD-1036 (Rev. 10-16-2009)

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FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

Import Form

Form Type: **Date:** 04/03/2019

Title: (U//~~FOUO~~) Turning Point USA, Campus Clash Event at University of Connecticut

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Approved By: SIA

Drafted By:

Case ID #:

Synopsis: (U//~~FOUO~~) Copy of document sent to CTIC from University of Connecticut (UConn) Police Department regarding the Campus Clash event scheduled for 9 April 2019 at UConn at the Student Union Ballroom.

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FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
FOI/PA
DELETED PAGE INFORMATION SHEET
FOI/PA# 1585305-000

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FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

Date of entry 03/01/2021

On February 25, 2021, [redacted] telephone number [redacted] was interviewed via telephone by Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Special Agent (SA) [redacted] and SA [redacted] After being advised of the identities of the interviewing Agents and the nature of the interview, [redacted] voluntarily provided the following information:

[redacted] helped to facilitate a bus trip from [redacted] to the Washington, D.C. area on January 6, 2021. The purpose of the trip was to hear then-president DONALD J. TRUMP (TRUMP) make a speech. The trip was arranged via social media. Another TRUMP supporter gave [redacted] the phone number of a guy in [redacted] to call to get the bus arranged. [redacted] provided the date, time, and location to that individual and TURNING POINT USA then paid for the bus. Neither [redacted] nor any of the passengers had to pay any money for the bus trip. [redacted] phone number was provided to a lot of people via word-of-mouth.

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[redacted] contacted [redacted] and told her that the following three people with associated phone numbers would potentially be travelling with [redacted] on the bus:

[redacted] (ph) [redacted]
[redacted] (ph) [redacted]
[redacted] (ph) [redacted]

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[redacted] was not certain that these people actually travelled on the bus as [redacted] could have substituted people. [redacted] believed that [redacted] may have brought another friend.

[redacted] went down to meet the bus on January 6, 2021. The bus, which was donated by TURNING POINT USA, was a large coach-style bus that could hold forty to fifty people. [redacted] did not think the bus company had any

Investigation on 02/25/2021 at Manassas, Virginia, United States (Phone)

File # 89B-WF-3376929 Date drafted 02/25/2021

by [redacted]

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This document contains neither recommendations nor conclusions of the FBI. It is the property of the FBI and is loaned to your agency; it and its contents are not to be distributed outside your agency.

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passenger names, but the bus company might have [redacted] name since she scheduled the bus. [redacted] could not remember the bus company's name, but it was possibly [redacted] or something similar. In addition to the bus leaving from [redacted] there was also a bus leaving from [redacted]

[redacted] did not go on the trip to Washington, D.C. and stayed in [redacted] called her around noon on January 6, 2021, and asked her if she was at the protest but she told him she was [redacted] A friend that was at the protest texted [redacted] and told her there were people in the crowd telling the crowd to go up to the Capitol and that the barriers were being taken down by police, but [redacted] told her friend not to listen to them.

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The bus got separated from the passengers it was supposed to pock up and kept getting diverted by police from the pickup point. [redacted] started calling people after hearing that the passengers could not find the bus. Eventually [redacted] reached [redacted] who was possibly on the corner of 14th and Constitution with a group of eighteen people looking for the bus. [redacted] did not recall what time it was when she possibly spoke with [redacted] helped [redacted] find people and get them back to the bus. The bus was supposed to have left by 4pm but police kept making the bus move.

[redacted] and the large group of people eventually had to walk to the bus. Some women were afraid to walk from 14th and Constitution to the bus and [redacted] went to go get them. [redacted] and [redacted] would have been communicating via the same phone number [redacted] was being interviewed on, [redacted]

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[redacted] did not know [redacted] personally but [redacted] had never met [redacted] before. [redacted] could not identify [redacted] did not believe the photograph of [redacted] looked like anyone she saw get on the bus, but she was not looking that closely at everyone.

[redacted] would look for the bus company information. [redacted] was available for recontact.

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
FOI/PA
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FOI/PA# 1585305-000

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